

# BLOSSOMING HOPE



A SILVER  
LINING SERIES  
BOOK - 4



LANE ANDERSON

# **Blossoming Hope**

**A Silver Lining Series**

**Book 4**

**Lane Anderson**



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## A Special Gift For You!

I wanted to give you a special gift just for joining me in this adventure to the past. Having you by my side is an essential component in this journey of conquering all my dreams as an author. I don't take you for granted, and I greatly appreciate your presence! So to say thank you, I am gifting you a Free Copy of "**Bound to be my Sweetheart!**" Get your free copy by clicking the image below or [clicking here!](#)



Kind Regards,  
[Lane Anderson](#)

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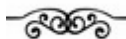
Blossoming Hope A Silver Lining Series Book 5

Other Books by Lane Anderson

# Chapter One

Columbus, Ohio

1918



The air around Hope ceased to rotate once again. But unlike last time, it was still not enough to make her stop breathing. ‘Eric. Ring. Proposal.’ These words kept ringing in her head. This must be a dream, she thought to herself. Hope knew that Eric would soon be married to Anna in a few weeks and nothing was going to change that. She had already left the mansion for the good of all and nothing was going to take her back there anytime—even if she was out of work.

She took her focus back to the situation at hand. Eric. A ring. Kneeling. Proposal. This was one impossible dream.

She turned to her friend and colleague, "Celine, is this really happening? Or I am dreaming?" Hope inquired. It was the first thing she had said since Eric walked into the restaurant.

Celine laughed, alongside a few onlookers. Eric smiled a bit and tilted his head. He was sure she wasn't used to having such attention on her. Of course, being the humble woman she was she just wanted to have enough to provide for herself and her mother.

"It's not a dream, Hope." Celine quickly replied.

Hope shook her head. "No, no. It almost happened like this in my dream once and then-" she hurriedly closed her mouth when she realized what she was about to say in front of all the people that stood before her.

"Um, Mr. Burnett? What's going on here?" It was Mrs. Barter.

Hope was happy that if indeed this wasn't a dream, Mrs. Barter had come to her rescue. ‘Why would Eric propose to her? Wasn't Anna his first choice?’ These questions rapidly collated one after the other in Hope's mind.

It was obvious that she had begun to feel something for him but from his past actions, he had clearly shown that it wasn't mutual. She was Hope Duncan, the chicken soup chef, and nanny. And he was Mr. Eric Burnett, one of the finest bankers in the whole city. Why was she even thinking about him in the first place? He was way out of her league. He would never marry a woman so far beneath his class.

Hope was so lost in her thoughts she didn't realize that Eric had started a conversation with Mrs. Barter. The customers and everyone in the restaurant looked on with keen interest. It was not every day they saw such a rich good looking man defy the laws of class and social status to propose to his children's nanny; more so, in public.

Men who usually did this always made sure the masses didn't find out that those women were a member of their staff. Eric considered that fact quite often. His initial intention to propose to Hope during the dinner was also backed up by such reasons. He considered the rumors that would fly around town. Was she worth all of that? He wasn't sure about that then. But now, he knew without a shadow of a doubt that Hope was special and she was going to get all the special treatment she deserved. His children had proven that.

"How do you think this is good for my business, Mr. Burnett?" Hope heard Mrs. Barter ask.

Oh no! She was at risk of losing her job. She had to get Eric out of here as soon as possible and as well say no to his proposal. She didn't see a reason why she should say yes. Well, that's if you remove the fact that she loves him and has yearned to be a mother to his children.

"I'm sorry for the intrusion, Mrs. Barter. I just know that if I asked Hope somewhere else, she would not have accepted to go with me," he said and looked to Hope with pleading eyes. He wished she would just come home with him and he could tell her everything, from when they met, to the proposal that was meant for her, to how he got to this point.

In her eyes, he could see the willingness to say yes, but something held her back. 'Was she scared of the version of me she first met?' he asked himself.

Hope was sure of one thing, no matter how much she loved Eric and his children; she wasn't going to accept a proposal from him. It would change everything, no doubt. But with the show Eric had put on, would she be able to handle the snickers as she walked down the street? 'The poor nanny who had an affair with her master' is what people would say. What would her mother think? She snagged a rich man who treated her like an indentured servant some months ago? No way.

Eric was still in the middle of explaining himself to Mrs. Barter when she spoke up, "I'm sorry about all this, Mrs. Barter. I'll speak to Mr. Burnett now," she wiped her hands on her apron and came out from behind the counter.

She pulled Eric up from his feet and almost lost her balance. The little contact she made with his hands sent tingling sensations down her spine. This man was surely going to be the death of her.

"Listen to me, Hope," he said as he helped her find her footing. Her soft and silky skin on his hands was a perfect fit. It seemed all too familiar for a feeling that was so new. "I know this is a bit too soon. I know it's coming as a shock to you and you're having a hard time processing this. I know I might have been the worst person on some days, but can you please consider this?" Eric asked with all sincerity.

Hope stared with her mouth open at the beautiful man in front of her. This was one of her many dreams to come true, but she didn't see herself accepting.

The population of people in the restaurant had increased a great deal and everyone looked up to her in anticipation. They were about to make history, she knew within her. She felt a tug on her dress and she looked down to see who it was, Alice. Those beautiful doe eyes stared at her, waiting for her to say 'yes.' She looked like she had not taken her afternoon nap.

Hope opened her mouth to speak, "Has she slept all day?" The audience groaned. That was not the response they were waiting to hear.

"No," Alice replied. "I won't sleep until you come home with us," Alice said looking at her expectantly.

Tears began to well up in Hope's eyes. She had never imagined that the children would miss her so much. She pulled her hands out of Eric's grasp, bent to the floor, and picked Alice.

"How are you my darling?" She asked her.

"I don't want to stay with Anna. Please come back," she began to cry.

Morgan left Eric's side and stood beside her as well. "I won't go to my next opera without you," he stated.

Hope turned her attention back to Eric who tilted his head slightly, waiting for her response. She looked at the children once more before she answered, "Yes. I will marry you, Mr. Eric Burnett," she said smiling.

Claps, cheers, and gasps could be heard from the crowd that stood watching.

Ever thought of what a happy family would look like? That picture was complete, right before their eyes. Eric could not contain his joy as he slipped the ring into her finger. With Morgan in his arms and Alice in hers, he put his free arm around her.

Perfect. Now the conditions?

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Eric didn't expect this would be stress-free for him. He knew Hope would have her own set of rules and conditions she would want to live with. But saying she wouldn't live in the mansion with him? Wasn't that a little too far?

Well, he would get what he can and pray that with time; everything would eventually fall into place. Lucky for him, Alice was there to be the baby she was and had convinced Hope to follow them home. Mrs. Barter was initially highly perturbed with Mr. Burnett but eventually softened up when Hope promised her that she was going to return to work the following day.



It had only been a few hours and she already missed the smile on Alma's face when she spoke to her. She missed the small friendly smile Charles always gave to her when no one was watching. She missed the calm in Joanne's voice when she came to give her instructions from Eric. 'Her fiancé.' It sounded so strange in her head, but she was going to have to get along with it soon enough.

"Do you think dinner can be prepared in an hour?" Eric asked Joanne. "I'd love all preparations to be made quickly. There has been a change that was long due in this house. Everyone needs to know," he said, proudly looking at Hope conversing with Alma effortlessly. He should have listened to his sister long ago. It would have helped him avoid the dramatics that came with Anna and Diane.

It was sad that his mother was not here to share in his joy. Joanne had told him that she was aware of what he had done and said she was not going to have a hand in whatever he wanted to do with a peasant. That was all Hope was to her. Eric knew there was a battle ahead and he had to be prepared for it. Knowing Diane, she wasn't going to sit down and watch the wedding happen successfully.

Dinner went along as planned. Hope openly announced her desires for the wedding to be put on hold for a while. Morgan and Alice clung to Hope the entire night, ensuring that she was not able to leave. The satisfaction on Eric's face when he saw Hope lying in between his kids left him feeling like a proud man, no doubt.

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"What do you think about this?" Alma asked. She wasn't going to spare a minute in ensuring that Hope got the VIP treatment Eric's fiancé' deserved. She held out a burgundy dress that was skillfully detailed with crisscross stones. It was more beautiful than what she had seen Anna wear in her dream. Hope could never afford to wear such a dress.

"I don't think my life's savings would be enough to pay for that, Alma," she said nervously.

"You will not pay, Hope. Eric will pay for everything. He's splurging on both of us. You'll be attending a few dinner parties from time to time and Eric thought you would need new dresses in lieu of those times," Alma said.

Hope breathed out. She could not help but blush.

"Thank you, Alma, for all you do. I know I can never repay you, but I pray you get all the good things your heart desires," Hope said as she hugged Alma.

"You deserve all of this and so much more, Hope. I overheard your mother say this to you when you broke the news of your engagement to her. She wasn't wrong. You're a good person and deserve all the wonderful things this life has to offer." Alma declared then brushed

her hair slightly. Hope was stunned by Rosemary's reaction to her engagement with Eric. She had expected her to talk her out of it but received the direct opposite. Rosemary said she smelt it coming.

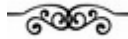
Hope could not help the tears that rolled down her cheeks after. She could not get over the fact that people could indeed be this kind.

"Enough of the tears, Hope," Alma uttered gently. She walked down to the aisle where she had seen a collection of silver dinner gowns. Hope followed close behind her. "Seen anything you like?"

Hope smiled, "You know I imagined myself in a corset dress a million times."

"Then it is yours," Alma insisted, examining the dress. "As long as it's a perfect fit."

## Chapter Two



"Ever considered owning your own kitchen?" Eric queried her as they stood on the patio one evening, hand in hand. It had become Eric's favorite time of the day, the evenings with his second chance at love.

"Truth be told, it's always been on my mind. I was raised in the kitchen; it has always been an aspiration to remain in the kitchen," she smirked. "Not so much now though. I mean, I have a family to take care of. I would still love to own my own restaurant, one day." She stated. It had always been her dream and Eric would make sure it happened.

"What do you envision for your dream restaurant?" Eric urged.

"You sure do have a lot of questions tonight," she commented laughing.

"Cut me some slack here. I'm trying to learn more about your hopes and dreams," he looked at her face and said, "or remember that." Hope had told him most of these things before and as it was in his nature, he wanted to hear them all over again.

"Marble top tables will be my first choice. They have a way of attracting rich men to small restaurants," she said referring to Barter's Pot.

"Oh, really?" Eric said in-between laughs. Hope had seen firsthand how attracted customers were to the marble top counter that Mrs. Barter had recently installed. She said it screamed elegance and she wasn't wrong. It attracted more wealthy customers to the restaurant. Due to her engagement to Eric, Mrs. Barter had agreed to reduce her workload. Mrs. Barter was well aware of the commitment she had with Morgan and Alice. They needed her and she was going to be there for them as much as she could.

"Well, technically speaking, you've been to Barter's Pot a lot since Mrs. Barter got that marble top counter installed," Hope stated factually.

"I suppose, you're right. I have been there several times since that counter was installed, but I think it has a lot more to do with you, don't you think?" Eric challenged. A blush immediately crept onto her cheeks. "Why spend my lunch breaks at some lush restaurant when I can spend it watching the woman I love?"

"What?" Hope stopped walking abruptly and turned to look at Eric. "I thought you went there because you were so in love with my chicken soup," she said and slapped his arm playfully.

"Well, yes. Of course, I love your soup. But I have to admit watching you in the kitchen brings me much joy." Eric noted. "I could watch you for hours."

Hope was fuming inwardly. She knew jealousy wasn't a good virtue but she couldn't help it. "Alright Mister, if you're going to stay here and talk about Celine's snacks that require zero stress and, you should consider doing that somewhere else. I'm not going to stand here and listen to you talk down my chicken soup-" Her eyes were open wide.

EAS he gazed into her eyes at that moment, it was perfect. A perfect time for his lips to touch hers. Although it happened quickly, the feeling lingered on her lips for a long time.

"You truly make me the happiest man alive. I pray that I will provide you with the same feeling in due time."

Hope hastily brushed her lips against his once again. Eric wasn't expecting such a response but it was better than anything he had imagined. He couldn't wait for her to become his wife.

"Now what do you think your mother would say about your dream restaurant?" Eric asked her, returning to their conversation. He had already made a few connections and was going to make sure that Hope received her dream restaurant.

"I can't talk about things like that with her for now. With her condition and all?" Hope explained.

Eric nodded instantly. He understood what she was going through. It wasn't easy for her to talk to her mother these days except if it was about pressing issues; the restaurant wasn't one of them at the moment.

"How is she doing, by the way?" Eric asked.

Hope smiled. She loved Eric and there was no doubt in her heart that she did. He was always concerned about how her mother was faring and he went a long way to show her how much he cared. "You asked about her twice already, Eric. I do appreciate your concern."

"I'm sorry, I just wish I could meet her already and apologize for all the things I did and-" Eric shot out swiftly. Hope could not recognize this Eric and she was very sure he did not recognize himself as well. Previously, he would not care about another person's opinions about him. But that was not the case now. Eric Burnett sought forgiveness from Rosemary Duncan.

"Shh, Eric," Hope responded. "You don't have to worry. She doesn't hold anything against you. You were having your share of bad days and acted in unrecognizable ways. That wasn't you and she's well aware of that."

Eric exhaled, "Does that mean she approves?" He implored.

"Would I even be standing here with you if she didn't?" Hope

blurted out.

"I'll still be going to see her when she's feeling better. It's not proper that I take her daughter away without proper consultation," Eric said. No matter what Hope was going to say next, he had already taken his stand.

"As you please. Let's go in. I think I hear Alice. She should be awake by now. Come on," Hope insisted and took his hand.

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It did take Linda a while longer than imagined to get Alice ready for her first recital. Linda wondered what it was with these fancy schools and tasking little children with such activities. The day started with Alice crying because she could not find any of her tutus.

Linda had to explain to her that she had already packed them all in the bag so that they could take them to school with her. That didn't go over well with making Alice calm, she insisted on wearing it to the hall so that her friends could see her new tutu.

When Linda did not let her have her way, Alice proceeded to scatter the contents of the bag Linda had packed for her. Linda was flabbergasted and raised her voice at Alice as a result.

"Alright, alright," Linda said. "You may have your way now. Take out your tutu and put it on yourself since you want to be a stubborn child."

It didn't stop Alice from crying any further. She bawled at a pitch so high, Linda was sure the families' blocks away could hear her.

"Shh," Linda said trying to get Alice to keep quiet. She didn't budge, even though Linda pleaded with much vigor. Linda was in desperate need of assistance.

As if on cue, Hope entered the room, "What's going on, Linda?" She asked with a stern expression.

"I'm sorry, Miss Hope," she apologized like she was afraid of losing her job. Who wouldn't? Seeing Hope's face was enough to tell Alice that she needed to be quiet already. "You see, Alice here insisted on wearing her tutu to school. I told her that I'd packed it in the bag already because she is not supposed to dress before going to school and she began to throw a tantrum. She began crying and I couldn't reason with her at all. I'm so sorry." she apologized once again.

"It's quite alright, Linda. Have you prepared Morgan?" Hope inquired.

"Yes, he is downstairs with Mr. Burnett already. They are both dressed and ready to leave," she replied then slowly lowered her gaze to the floor.

"Alright," she said and turned to Alice. "Alice sweetie," she stretched her arms towards her and bent so that she could meet her sight. Alice got up from beside the bag and walked right into Hope's

arms.

"I want my tutu," she whispered into Hope's ear, in between sobs. Hope had become accustomed to Alice's tantrums and she was ready to weave through this just like the rest of them.

She rubbed Alice's back and said, "I know you want your tutu, Sweetie. But you also have to understand that you can't wear it to the recital. No one gets to sneak a peek at your beautiful tutu before you climb on stage," she explained to Alice but it seemed she wasn't buying any of it. She wanted to wear her tutu now, and that was it.

"You know what they say, Alice?" Hope continued. She wasn't going to let Alice off the hook so fast.

"That I should wear my tutu?" Alice asked, with a cheeky grin.

"No silly," Hope replied and slapped her playfully on her shoulder. Alice threw her head back and laughed. "Well, they say that if someone sees your tutu before a performance, it'll bring you bad luck," Hope told her.

Alice gasped, "No way," she shook her head. "And am I going to forget the steps?" She asked.

Hope nodded in response. "And you don't want to forget the steps, right?" She asked. Alice shook her head. She wanted her first recital to be perfect. "Then let's go. No one is to see your tutu. Change quickly, so we can leave." Alice hurriedly removed the tutu, replacing it with long pants. Then handed the tutu to Linda.

"Let's go!" She replied then ran out of her room to the staircase. "Papa! I'm coming!"

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As if getting Alice to cooperate with Linda didn't seem tough enough, getting her to cooperate with her instructor was another hassle. As the lead role on one of the performances, she had to be dressed in white, but she was insistent on wearing pink. It took the intervention of Hope for her to cooperate with her instructor who thanked her for being such a good mother to Alice. Hope was proud and did not refute the compliment.

Looking at her graceful moves on stage, one wouldn't guess that she had cried so much beforehand. To an extent, Alice was a handful. But Hope still loved her wholeheartedly.

Alice stood in the middle of three other three to four-year-olds as they performed the legendary Swan Lake. Alice made a beautiful dancer; she deserved the lead role.

It was always a pleasure to watch the kids perform—Morgan at the children's opera and Alice at her rehearsals, now on stage.

After a few more pieces the recital was over. The highlight of the recital was Swan Lake and Alice's family couldn't be more proud of Alice for her performance as the lead character.

"Thank you so much, Mr. and Mrs. Burnett for raising such a beautiful child," Alice's instructor complimented them after the show. Hope wanted to correct her but thought otherwise. She had become used to people referring to her as Eric's wife. "Special thanks to you, Mrs. Burnett. Your daughter is such a graceful dancer. You did raise her very well. Look at how she listens to you," the old lady said laughing.

Now, that claim, Hope had to correct. Eric sensing what she wanted to do interjected. "You see my wife here takes extra care of our children and I can't be more proud of her."

The instructor nodded, "I can see that. I watched the young master Morgan at his last opera performance. Great boy. I'll leave you now, Mr. and Mrs. Burnett. Have a nice weekend."

When the instructor was out of hearing range, Eric whispered into her ear, "They are your children too, Hope, don't give a thought about it."

## Chapter Three



"Did anyone miss me?" Hope heard someone ask from the doorway. She silently prayed that it was not who she thought it was.

Hope stood in the kitchen, making final arrangements for her mother to be discharged.

"When you get there, you tell Tabitha to check her vitals and do everything the doctor ordered. Thank you so much, Charles" she said as she turned to look at Charles. Since she returned to the house, they had resumed their friendship. Charles proved to be a very decent gentleman.

"As you wish, Hope. Don't mention it. I hope your mother gets well soon," he gave her a quick smile and walked out of the kitchen.

Hope folded up the paperwork that laid in front of her and proceeded to walk upstairs when she remembered, "Now where did that voice come from?" She wondered. She walked to the living room, saying a prayer under her breath. As she got there, she froze in her steps.

It was Anna.

"Um, hello Miss-" she looked around, gained her composure, and continued, "Um, Hello Anna. What brings you here?" Hope questioned.

Anna sized her up. There was no way she was going to pay attention or give any information to the person who so quickly replaced her as Eric's fiancé'.

"I brought her here," another voice joined in. "Anna dear, come here darling," Diane said with her arms outstretched. "It's so good to see you again after all these weeks," she cooed, kissing her on both cheeks.

Anna sighed "You don't know how terrible things have gone since your son decided to abandon me for someone who can't show basic hospitality!" She exclaimed.

Diane scoffed, "You don't know how difficult it has been for me on my part." She slowly clinched her chest as false tears struggled to vacate the bottom of her eyelid, "Imagine being in a place where no one loves you and they're all against you, not even your children."

Anna gasped, "Not even your children?"

Diane put her fingers under her eyes in a mock attempt to clean tears, "It has been an outright hassle to live here. I've been so alone and it's depressing. Eric doesn't even get it. I wonder if he truly cares about his dear Mother?"

Anna looked at Hope with disgust. To say she hated her was an



understatement. She wanted to see Hope buried alive for ruining all of her efforts to restore her relationship with Eric.

"That's alright, Mrs. Diane. Everything is going to be fine now. I'm here for you. And I always will be," Anna said and pulled her close.

Hope wasn't surprised. She knew Anna and Diane were putting on an act. Yes. She heard about the fight that Eric had with Anna before he left in search for Hope. Diane only asked that Anna return because she didn't like how things were panned out with Hope and Eric; that scared her the most. The extent one human would go to hurt another. The sad reality of life.

But why didn't Eric inform her of Anna's arrival?

"I'll leave you two to yourselves now. You're always welcome here, Anna." Hope said politely. "Can I help with your bags?" She asked. Anna nodded. "I'll get the maid to do just that. Excuse me," she said and left the room.

"Thank you, Hope," Anna said through gritted teeth. She had returned and was going to make life as miserable as possible for Hope.

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"What do you think about Anna's return?" Hope asked, longing for some reasonable answers from him.

"I sure am surprised that she's back," Eric replied. Hope was surprised. She was highly aggravated with her presence.

"Come on, after our last conversation and how she humiliated herself in front of the staff, I didn't think she would want to show her face here ever again."

Hope nodded. She was trying to understand Anna's aim. Or Diane's rather. "And your Mother?" Hope asked.

"I don't understand what games she is playing. But none of that matters. I want things to go smoothly from now, to the wedding, till forever. I just have to keep Anna here for a while to please mother. Is that going to be an issue?" Eric asked. "If it is I might as well find somewhere else for them to stay. But I'm afraid of what my mother might do to herself. She's very unpredictable as of late."

Hope blushed and nodded. It had become her reflex action these past weeks. Of course, she did not want him to put his mother out but she sure was not making that decision any easier.

"And how is my mother-in-law doing?" Eric asked.

Hope smiled, "It's the third time, Eric. The third time today."

"What?" Eric asked smiling back. "You haven't given me any substantial information about her. Saying she's fine will not calm my nerves," he proclaimed.

Hope thought for a while and then sighed. "She's doing quite well. Got discharged today. Tabitha, the new caretaker is with her now, all thanks to you," she smiled shyly.

"And have you considered my proposal? To move her here to live with us?" Eric asked. He had brought up the question a dozen times but Hope kept brushing it off.

"I don't know, Eric. Think about your mother. And Anna now too. I don't want her to have any inconveniences. She's in recovery and although I wish I could be with her now, I just don't see how living with us is best," Hope replied.

Eric sighed, he used his right palm to rub his forehead and said, "Think about it this way. Your mother is here with us, she gets to see that I'm a good man and I'm going to treat her beautiful daughter like she deserves. She also gets to recover here. Right next to you," Eric tilted his head to study her face. He wished he knew what was running through her mind at that instant, but that was almost impossible. "She can be in your room with you if you want. She can be in the next room. Whichever is fine with you, Hope. Just let me do this for you," he said conclusively.

"You've done enough already, my love. And I don't want any more favors from you, Eric. You have done enough," Hope repeated. "And why is my mother's acceptance your priority?" She laughed.

Eric scowled. He didn't know how to put it in such a way that wouldn't make him sound foolish. "Well, I love you too much to see any of your loved ones uncomfortable. So, I will help your mother as much as I can," he grinned.

"Alright, she won't move in just yet. I'll invite her over for dinner tomorrow. I will tell her you want to spend time with her at your request," Hope winked. "Just be on your best behavior," she advised him.

"I'm always on my best behavior," Eric argued.

Hope threw her head back and laughed, her laughter was followed by loud applause. "Who would have thought that the Eric Burnett had a sense of humor? This is something I will never cease to enjoy," she said staring admiringly at him.

Eric stared back at her "Well, I am glad I can bring you such joy," he said and wrapped his arms around her. "And I wasn't trying to be funny for the record."

"Oh, I'm sure," Hope said and allowed herself to sink into the hug. The strong scent of Eric's aftershave had become one of her favorite smells. She allowed herself to be consumed in it until Eric said it was time to leave the garden. Yes, it had become their getaway place from all the madness that seemed to be going on inside the house.

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Sunset came by quickly that ember day. The rustling of leaves in the evening wind could be heard from a distance. Owls hooting their morning songs because indeed, it was a start of a new day for them—

just like it was for Anna.

"What do you think about my dress?" She looked in the mirror for the fifteenth time.

"It looks just perfect on you, Anna. Are you sure that the peasant's mother is going to be here?" Diane asked.

"Yes, I'm sure. I overheard Eric talk about it with her last night. She did suggest it although Eric suggested something much worse," Anna scoffed.

Diane was confused. Anna told her she overheard the conversation between Eric and Hope but hadn't given her the full story. "And what could that be?" She asked worriedly.

"Oh, calm down Diane. He just asked that her mother move in. That's why I'm trying to make sure that she gets as uncomfortable as she can ever be so she wouldn't want to come back after I'm finished with her." Anna stated.

"Oh, Eric." Diane lamented. "What have you done bringing such people into your home?"

"I don't have any idea," Anna said.

Diane understood that after Eric and Hope's wedding, there was no turning back. She was going to have to face the consequences for what Eric's marriage to Hope would bring to her social status. There was only one way out of this.

Dinner is served.

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Hope's mother was definitely not what Diane and Anna were expecting. Contrary to their expectations, Rosemary was a drop-dead gorgeous woman. Her aura radiated kindness from her heart. There was no doubt she was Hope's mother. Their hair length was the same, and each had neatly arched eyebrows. The only thing that separated them was the fact that Hope had taken her father's ocean blue eyes while her mothers were a tint of grey. Even so, they both were beautiful.

"And then Hope struggled with the spatula. She was so frustrated she almost dipped her hand into the pot if not for her father's timely intervention." Rosemary ended the sixth story she shared about Hope that night.

While everyone was having a good time, Hope wasn't. She covered her face in shame as her mother told embarrassing stories about her childhood. 'Please stop, Mother,' she thought to herself.

"You know, I'm beginning to think inviting you for dinner today was a big mistake," Hope said annoyed.

"Very well, my dear. But please remember you did not invite me here, Eric did," Rosemary said laughing. She was livelier than Hope last remembered. When she saw her in this way, she felt spikes of

gratitude well in her heart for Eric and Alma.

"But I did, Mother. Eric here suggested you move in with us," Hope let slip out then quickly threw her hands over her mouth.

Rosemary was shocked. She looked between Eric and Hope before she nodded, "I mean, that would be a beautiful idea."

Eric nodded, "I told you, Hope," he pulled her hands off her mouth and entwined his fingers with hers.

"Now this is the problem with having peasants at the table," Diane whined. "One can't eat in peace without asking for a handout." She mumbled and threw her fork into her tray.

"I thought it was only me," Anna said as she adjusted the napkin on her lap. She knew better than to look up after that remark. She regretted saying it almost immediately. She wasn't on Eric's good side and it wasn't such a good time to have such an attitude.

"Is something the matter, Mother? Anna?" Eric asked. Through the dinner, he had tried his best to ignore both of them, but they must have sworn an oath to make it impossible for him to do so.

"It is unlike us to have peasants at the table!" Diane bellowed.

Everyone was taken aback by her outburst.

Eric shook his head slightly. He knew what he had to do but still hesitated. Alma, who sat on his left side, nudged him. He cleared his throat and started, "Mother, you are being highly offensive and rude to our guest. You as well Anna. You both better change your attitude or dismiss yourselves from the table. I will be marrying Hope in a few weeks. Accepting that would be best for us all. Her mother is now part of this family and will be living with us henceforth. If you don't like it, then don't have to remain in this house." Eric yelled without stopping for breath.

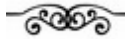
Diane sized Hope and Rosemary up before shifting her gaze to her children. Alma stared back at her while Eric looked away. She placed her balled fist on the table and hit it hard. The clinking of metal on chinaware was heard from afar. She pushed her chair in an attempt to leave the table and just as she was about to rise from the chair, she slumped.

"Mother!"

"Mother!"

She could hear Eric and Alma calling out to her. Slipping out of consciousness, their voices became faint, shutting her out of the world.

## Chapter Four



The last time Eric was at this hospital was to consult with the doctor about Hope's mother before she began treatment.

The events of the previous night still played over and over in his head. Was the attack triggered by his outburst? Was he being too hard on her? What if he hadn't yelled at her last night, would she be okay by now? The thoughts came rushing in and he had no one to blame but himself for the situation at hand.

'Diane had a heart attack and it's all your fault,' his subconscious told him.

"How is she doing?" Eric asked as a nurse walked out from Diane's room. He needed to be updated soon as it seemed like he was gradually losing it.

"I can't say, for now, Sir. The doctor will be with you in a little while," the nurse replied and went back to the nurses' station.

Eric stood pacing outside the room. Alma and Hope sat on a long bench opposite him. He was overjoyed when Hope showed up; her face brought him much needed calm. Even though Diane had been everything but nice to her, Hope still made an appearance. It only showed how kind Hope's heart truly was.

If this was a price he had to pay for standing his ground with his mother, then he didn't regret it at all. Eric sat with his head in his palms recounting all the good things that had happened since he met Hope.

Despite his conviction that he did the right thing, he was still plagued by doubts. The restoration of his home, a mended relationship between him and his children. The pros were too many to consider the cons. Even if he did consider them, his mother was responsible for whatever had befallen her. It was not his fault.

If things didn't go well for Diane, he knew he would have to hold off the wedding for much longer; a fact he did not allow to linger for long.

Eric stopped pacing and went to sit on the bench in between Alma and Hope. "It's all my fault," Alma stated.

"No, it's mine," Hope said.

Eric looked between the two ladies. He sighed and said, "Well, I think it's my fault."

They exhaled at the same time and burst out laughing. Eric inhaled and exhaled once more. "Why are we even blaming ourselves?" He asked rhetorically.

"Because if my mother hadn't come here, there wouldn't have been a-

"Because if I hadn't pushed you to stand up to her, she wouldn't be-

They began to explain simultaneously. Eric burst out laughing. "You see? None of this is our fault," he repeated. "If Mother was a bit more considerate and less of a prude, things would be quite different."

"Hey Eric. Hope. Alma," the doctor came up to them. He wore an amused look on his face. Eric wondered what could be so funny about his mother's situation.

"What's going on?" Eric asked.

The doctor looked between Alma and Hope as if seeking permission to continue with what he had to say. Eric nodded hastily and he continued. "I must say your mother is one of a kind. There is absolutely nothing wrong with her. I've checked her vitals and everything seems to be in place. She just doesn't want you to get married," he chuckled.

"Are you serious?" Alma asked.

"Goodness gracious!" Hope gasped.

Eric rubbed his forehead with his palm, "Did she tell you that?"

"No, not at all. I could deduce that from her faking a heart attack during a family dinner, a few weeks to your wedding," the doctor said, checking a few things on his notepad. "You never thought it was possible?" He looked at Eric dumbfounded.

Eric shook his head, "Never imagined she would go this far. But thank you for the information, doc." He exclaimed then went in for a handshake. "Do well to not tell her we know about this."

"Have a nice day, Eric. Good-bye ladies," the doctor waved and left the hallway.

"Let's go get some sleep." Eric suggested.

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Three weeks had gone by and Diane was still putting up an act. Eric wondered how long it would be until she finally gave up and accepted that there was no stopping the wedding.

Anna hadn't been any different. She lived in the hospital like Diane was in some terrible condition. Oftentimes, she even tried to pick fights with Eric and Alma over their indifference to their mother's "condition."

"Hope, have you thought about what color flowers you want on the aisles?" Alma asked.

Hope looked confused, "Is that left for me to decide as well?" She held a puzzled glare.

"Yes, it is." Alma replied laughing. "It's your big day; we have to make it memorable for you"

"But it's Eric's big day too," Hope whined.

"No doubt, yes. It's Eric's big day as well. But is Eric going to be walking down the aisle with you?" Alma quizzed.

Hope knew she was making a fuss over something unnecessary but she couldn't help it. Left for her alone, she would have gotten married in a small church in the presence of the children, her mother, his sister, and everyone else could stay at home.

"Can we leave that for later at least?" Hope whined again.

Alma shot her scrutinizing look. There was something off about Hope today. Her usual cheerful and expectant personality was nowhere to be found.

"Is there a problem, Hope?" Alma asked with concern.

Hope turned her head a bit and then replied, "The dinner is in two days, meaning the wedding is in three. I'm scared, Alma. I'm afraid Anna is going to do something to ruin the wedding. If she can go as far as cooperating with Diane to try to push the date further, what further harm will she not do?" Hope asked in a rush. Her hands were shaking. It was obvious she was going to have a breakdown soon if she wasn't put at ease.

Alma took her hands and pulled her in for a hug. She almost knew how Hope felt and she couldn't help but pity her. It was not her fault Hope felt that way; it was because of her mother and Anna.

Hope began to sob, with her head on Alma's shoulder, "Is there a way I can opt-out of this wedding?"

Alma shook her head. She wasn't going to force Hope into doing anything but at the same time, she wasn't going to allow her to make rash decisions. "Eric has got it all covered, Hope," Alma said comfortingly. "They are not even aware that the wedding preparations are still in place. The dinner is going to go well, trust me." Alma said.

A few seconds later, Anna walked into the small walkway that connects to the ground floor. Alma and Hope looked at her with startled looks.

"Hello, Anna." Hope said after a while.

"Good day Anna, how do you do?" Alma followed.

She didn't reply to either of their greetings. She brushed past them and walked towards the stairway.

They looked at each other and shrugged, each praying deep down that she hadn't heard their conversation. Or even if she had heard, she wouldn't find out that the wedding is happening that very weekend.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I'll be leaving now, Mother. Make sure you take care of yourself. Anna is here to ensure you get everything you want and need. Okay?" Eric said as he made to exit the hospital.

"Why can't you stay here with me? Why can't you spend the

night?" Diane asked desperately.

Eric had done that many other nights, but it was a night to his wedding and he could not afford to miss the dinner he was hosting. He had already sent out invites and hired an orchestra as well.

He also made sure the food was perfect—only the finest cuts of beef and most expensive champagne although it was just a small gathering for family and friends.

"I can't, Mother," he kissed her forehead. "Goodnight, try to get some sleep."

He went all out as he prepared for the event. He purchased the best linen for decorations, updated the chairs in the dining room just for a different look, and to his usual standard, he sought after his tailor for a custom suit. The suit was just a perfect fit for him.

"The dinner is tonight, isn't it?" Anna asked as she slowly passed by Eric.

Eric froze on the spot, afraid to make any sudden moves. He wasn't sure if Anna knew or if she was just testing him. He raised a brow questioningly.

"What? Your insistence that I stay with your mother throughout the day? That was suspicious enough," Anna smirked.

"Oh Anna, can you just let us have this one day to ourselves?" Eric begged. He wanted this to be a special moment for him and Hope without any shadows clouding their happiness.

"Why didn't I at least get an invite?" Anna persisted. "I tried to get into the mansion earlier and I was sent away because I wasn't with an invite. What kind of person does that to his best friend?" She asked, tears gathering at the corners of her eyes ready to drop at any moment.

"A man that wants to make his bride happy." He replied with almost no trace of emotion in his voice, he finally exited the room.

\*\*\*\*\*

Clinking of glasses, soft tunes from the orchestra, peach fragrance from the petals Hope picked filled the room. Although it was a small quaint dinner, Alma made sure that everything went on without a hitch. Eric's family was catching up on the latest happenings in the city. A few were there to genuinely partake in their joy while the rest were there so that they had something to talk about when they returned to work on Monday.

"Great gathering, Eric," his distant maternal cousin commended. "I'm just thrilled you've changed the narrative. No one would have imagined you have the gall to marry a girl who does not come from an affluent family. Well done, and the lady is a keeper, too." He patted Eric and walked away.

Eric didn't know if he should be proud or insulted by his



compliment. He brushed it off immediately, backed by the reason that he only wanted to enjoy himself and nothing was going to stop that.

After everyone had settled into the big dining room where all of the food was set, Eric stood from his seat.

"Attention, everybody," he said while clinking his glass with a teaspoon.

"I would love to introduce my beautiful fiancé' and her mother to you all," he said and urged them to stand. A round of applause erupted from the table and Eric could not have been more proud. Some snickered and whispered amongst themselves, but he didn't give thought to any of them. It was just him, his bride, his children in the room; they were all that mattered most to him.

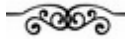
Alice and Morgan stood up as well causing everyone to laugh.

"They say light dispels darkness, and I must agree. Hope has been nothing but the constant ray of sunshine in my life and in my children's life ever since she walked in our lives," he said and looked around. "Well, my children first before mine," he chuckled.

Some of the guests had lost interest in what he had to say while the others looked on in anticipation.

Eric laughed, as people at the table cheered him on. "I don't want to go on for too long so that I don't read my vows here," he said and everyone in the room burst with laughter. "My intentions are clear. To make Hope Duncan the happiest woman in the world. Here, here! Cheers to Hope!"

## Chapter Five



Hope looked around and could not find Morgan nor Alice. In the midst of the celebration, she had forgotten all about them. Although there were just a few guests, it felt like they had invited half of the town's dignitaries; not that Hope minded. If Eric wanted to throw a big party, sure, she would have let him have his way. But she was grateful on the other hand that he had chosen a family gathering instead.

Hope sighted Linda coming down the stairs and she thought immediately to approach her. It was a beautiful thing what she was doing—caring for the children. Many people would not have had the patience to put up with half of the trouble they made. They had been lucky to find someone like Linda.

She tried her best to establish eye contact with her, but all efforts seemed to be blocked by the attention Eric's cousin gave to her. Hope enjoyed the fact that she was along with at least one of them. Who knows? Maybe the next dinner would be in her honor.

When Hope couldn't wait any longer, she walked to where Linda stood conversing with Eric's cousin. She cleared her throat. "Excuse me, Linda," she said with a smile. "Hello, Mister," she said to Eric's cousin with an extended hand.

He took her hand in his and she shook it gently while he carefully examined her. He was admiring her. Not in a perverted way like how a few men she had come in contact with usually did. But in a respectable manner. It screamed 'Eric made the right choice' and Hope couldn't help but feel proud of the woman she had grown to become.

"A beautiful pair of blue orbs you've got there," he complimented.

"Why, thank you." Hope said politely. "If you don't mind, can I talk to Linda? I'm not taking her away, I just want to find out how the kids are doing," she said. She turned to Linda and started, "I'm sorry I was so lost in conversation that I didn't realize when Morgan and Alice left the table," she gushed.

Linda smiled, "That's alright, Miss Hope. I didn't mind. I put them to bed already; I trust that decision is fine by you? I should've asked first, my apologies."

Hope sighed, "Not at all" she said. "I'm glad I can count on you. Thank you and enjoy the rest of your evening. Excuse me," she said and walked away.

When she was gone, Eric's cousin turned to Linda and asked, "You really love kids, huh?"

Linda blushed, "They can be handful but there's no place I'd rather be," she replied.

"Now is that so?" Eric's cousin asked teasingly.

\*\*\*\*\*

After dinner, Hope and Eric decided to take a stroll. The evening was quiet and it gave all the peace Hope Eric longed for. In just a few hours, she would be married to a man she once despised. Isn't it funny?

"What's on your mind?" Eric asked as he entwined his fingers through hers.

Hope shrugged. "I just find it funny that a few months ago, I despised you and now, we'll be getting married in a few hours." She sighed while shrugging her shoulders to face him, "Isn't it funny?"

Eric chuckled, "Well, if you think about it that way, then yes, I guess it is funny."

"I wonder what being married to Eric Burnett would be like," Hope reminisced on previous fantasies. "Although I feel as though I've already experienced a great deal," she laughed.

"No, not at all," Eric said cutting her laughter short. "I don't think you've experienced the whole deal just yet. There's a lot more to come. A whole lot more," he said lowly. His mind was set on the plan for her restaurant that he had already begun to execute. He felt like he should have informed her, but another part of him wanted it to be her wedding gift. He expected her to see it that way.

Hope exhaled as Eric turned to face her. "What's the matter, my love?" He asked.

Hope sighed, "It's just the wedding," she stated. "I have a feeling something bad is going to happen tomorrow. I have a very unsettling feeling."

Eric stopped in his tracks. "I understand your worries, love. I have them too," he said looking in her eyes. "You don't have to worry about Anna or my mother sabotaging our big day. I've got it all covered; they won't have a chance to ruin tomorrow for us," he declared.

"But what if?" Hope started again.

Eric took her hands in his and said, "There are no what ifs in this case, my love. Everything is settled. The security team will ensure that Anna or Diane are nowhere near the mansion tomorrow, just like they couldn't today," he assured her. "They have also scanned the parameters for any possible threats and I am glad to announce that they have found none. Have a little faith in me, Hope. Just a little," he begged.

Hope gave a half smile, "I trust you, Eric. It's them I don't trust. You never know what they have up their sleeves," she said wearily. She shook her head dismissively. "Can you forget I mentioned any of

that? I'm sorry. I was just overthinking things. Everything will be fine," she sighed unsure if she believed that to be true.

Eric laughed, "Everything will be just fine, Hope. I understand that you're scared. It's normal. Let's just have a good time for now, okay?" He asked and took her right hand to his lips. He placed a couple of kisses there then enveloped her into his arms. "Do we have a deal?" He asked.

Hope nodded; she smiled and replied, "Yes, yes we do."

In an attempt to distract her from her thoughts, Eric asked, "Did you get Morgan's suit?"

Hope slapped her face with her palms. She was supposed to go with Morgan to pick out a suit some days ago but had totally forgotten. "I totally forgot," she whined.

Eric laughed, "I don't know if it's the wedding stress but you are hilarious tonight."

Hope frowned. "That was not funny, Eric," she said sternly.

"Wait, hold on. I was just trying to lighten the mood," he lifted his hands up in defense.

"You had better be. Or else you'd consider marrying Joanne tomorrow," she said and laughed.

\*\*\*\*\*

Contrary to what she told Eric the night before she was not done overthinking. Hope felt an unsettling feeling in the pit of her stomach. The feeling that something was going to ruin this day for her. The wedding was scheduled for eleven and she had not rested all night. She wished she could turn back the clock just to get a few hours of much needed sleep.

"What do you think about the decor?" Alma asked excitedly.

Hope shrugged. She had not left the room all morning, not even to get breakfast. As it was her special day, Alma insisted that everything be brought to her. Hope didn't have a problem going down to the kitchen to get her own food. They were just formalities and she didn't want to step on anyone's toes so she succumbed to the preferable treatment.

"Hope?" Alma called out.

She had zoned out while recounting the events that led to her being there and she was super grateful to one person, Miriam. If Miriam hadn't insisted on her taking the job as Morgan and Alice's nanny, she would not be where she was.

There was a knock on the door and almost immediately, the person rushed in. It was Cynthia Thomas, the tailor in charge of Hope's wedding.

"There's an emergency Miss," she said to Alma. "I can't find Miss Hope's dress," she rendered.

"What?" Alma questioned.

"How is that possible?" Hope joined in.

Cynthia sighed. "I left the dress in the room downstairs to remove the rhinestones Miss Hope asked to be removed from the dress and by the time I got back, it was gone," she explained.

Hope was crushed. It was all her fault. If she hadn't panicked and asked Cynthia to take out those rhinestones, her dress would be safely in her wardrobe.

"Have you checked with the staff? Have you asked everyone in the house?" Alma inquired.

Hope was too astonished to speak for herself.

"Did you ask Joanne? She could know something about it," Alma said.

Cynthia shook her head. "I have asked everyone out there and it is really nowhere to be found."

"I knew something bad would happen," Hope finally spoke up. "I knew something bad was going to happen. Now look, my wedding dress is gone. Where could it possibly be? Someone must've taken it." Hope posed to Cynthia.

Cynthia shrugged. Of the truth, she was just as surprised as Hope. She was left with no words.

"Do you have a laundry lady or anything of that sort that is not aware of what is going on here today? She might be the person we're looking for," Cynthia added hopefully.

Hope shook her head. "Joanne takes care of all of that and if she said she has no idea where it might be, then I have no clue where it could be."

"We could look around," Cynthia announced. "This house is big enough for a wedding gown to hide anywhere."

Alma and Hope got up from the bed. Alma's mind was filled with thoughts on how she was going to get a new dress from the store downtown, ready in a few hours. Hope's mind was totally elsewhere. She saw this as a sign that she wasn't supposed to get married to Eric. The only thought that went through her mind at the moment was how to cancel the wedding without causing harm to anyone. She needed some time alone. To think. To analyze. To breathe.

"I need some time alone. I need to think." She told Alma. "I'll just take a stroll to clear my mind."

"Alright," Alma replied and hugged her. "I'll work on getting a new gown right away," she said comfortingly.

Hope gave her a small smile and said "Thank you."

\*\*\*\*\*

Hope strolled through the grounds in a knee length beige dress. She was sad, it was her wedding day but there she stood moping.

Some people who recognized her as the bride looked at her with concern, wondering if she was okay. Little did they know she was on the brink of a breakdown.

As she approached the back of the mansion, far from where the wedding preparations were being made, she sighted the lady put in charge of Diane's welfare, Maria. Maria was much younger than Hope and obviously had no liking for her. She thanked Diane for that.

She hastened her footsteps to where Maria stood. Upon hearing the footsteps, Maria glanced back. Suddenly she turned on her heels and made for the front entrance, causing the item she held in her hands to drop. Hope's dress.

It was cut into unrecognizable strips. Hope collapsed to her knees as her hands cuffed her eyes. She couldn't control the tears that washed down her face.

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